



Ninoy Aquino

Portrait of a Hero

by

Teodoro Benigno

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Foreword by

Corazon C. Aquino

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This booklet is dedicated:

To all who believed in Ninoy

And helped make his dream come true.

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Foreword

In the histories of families and nations, of races and religions, of armies and even athletics, it is men and women of flesh and blood who challenge us and move us in the living of our lives, and the doing of great deeds -- more than mere principles or precepts. Churches hold up saints before our eyes, nations enshrine their heroes and heroines, sports have their halls of fame. And faith teaches us that God "draws us by the bonds of Adam": for God brought His revelation to its fulfillment by sending us His Son, "born of woman," to become "like us in all things save sin," and so lead us back to the Homeland for which He destined us.

In his own life, my husband **NINOY** always kept a place for heroes. Even in the arrival statement he wrote for his homecoming that fateful Sunday of 21 August 1983, he speaks of Gandhi, citing his words, to reaffirm his belief that the way of non-violence was the path our people should take in the pursuit of change, that violence would only bring more blood, more pain and suffering, more death and tears to our afflicted country.

It is ten years since **NINOY** gave his life in witness to his convictions, to his belief in the way of non-violence, his burning love for his people and his native land. During these years, many people, Filipinos and non-Filipinos alike, have told me that his life and dying awakened them from inaction and passive acceptance of evils and injustice, challenged them to stand up and be counted for the cause of freedom and the defense of human rights, even moved them, during the four days of February at **EDSA**, to the readiness to lay down their lives so that freedom and justice might return to our nation.

NINOY himself said more than once that courage is caught by infection, that brave deeds would call forth brave deeds, that self-sacrifice would summon self-sacrifice, that life given in love would become for others a wellspring of "impossible dreams."

Teddy Benigno was **NINOY**'s friend. He has written this little book as a tribute to him, in the hope that in times which continue to cry for heroic dedication and love for our country, **NINOY**'s deeds and words might summon renewed integrity and courage from all of us, especially from the young people in our land. It is his prayer, and surely it is ours also, that the gift of self, so totally made, which sealed **NINOY**'s life, might rekindle that faith in the Filipino and faith in God which burned like a sacred flame in **NINOY**'s heart to the last. It is with this same prayer that we bid this little book, written as a labor of love, 'godspeed' on its way to the hands, the hearts and minds of our fellow-Filipinos on this tenth anniversary of **NINOY**'s sacrifice.

Corazon C. Aquino
August 16, 1993

Preface

Every now and then, a nation sheds its daily labors to pause, to bring back to vivid memory the men and women who sacrificed their lives for the cause of national pride and dignity. It is well that the citizenry today remembers once again that 10 years ago, a man did just that. The assassin's bullet that pierced his brain also pierced the national conscience and jarred it loose from a deep and fitful slumber.

And so we observe the 10th anniversary of Benigno Aquino, Jr.'s death not simply as a ritual recollection but a call to arms.

It is not a call to arms in terms of revolt or revolution or a summoning to the barricades. It is a call to a moral reawakening. It is something like the pealing of churchbells in the night to remind us that the enemies of freedom are not asleep at all. And this is the purpose of this 10th anniversary. Ninoy Aquino should come alive again in our minds and our consciences. More than any other contemporary Filipino, he fought the good fight against the dictatorship. In fact, most of the time he fought it alone in the desolation of his Fort Bonifacio prison cell. It was a lonely fight but it was a majestic fight.

What made it majestic was that Ninoy, even when almost everybody deserted him and his cause, held the conviction that the Filipino was worth dying for. The Marcos dictatorship tried to break him in every way. It flung him into prison solitary for seven years and seven months. It falsely accused him of being a communist leader and sentenced him to death by military musketry. It dispatched him to a dismal matchbox prison in Laur, Nueva Ecija. There for 30 days, the dictatorship held a Russian roulette pistol to his head

through daily psychological torture. The dictatorship also offered Ninoy fabled riches and shared political power if he would say amen to the rulers of Malacanang.

They couldn't break him. His utterance before the military tribunal that tried and sentenced him has a deathless ring: "Some people suggest that I beg for mercy. But this I cannot in conscience do. I would rather die on my feet in honor than live on bended knees in shame."

It was a grim, gruelling epic battle between the Man in the Palace and the Man in Prison. President Ferdinand Marcos had all the power in the world. He governed the nation through the barrel of a gun as virtually the entire military establishment, police, and public officialdom agreed to do his bidding. He could buy almost anything and anybody. Ninoy had just one power. That was the power of his mind and his conscience and the rosary he bore in his right hand. In the end, the bayonets of the dictatorship could not prevail over the resolution of this man, his courage, his dignity, his nobility.

It was Ninoy's death that gave rise to People Power. Who can forget that funeral? It was the throb of a nation come alive. It was the martial law dam breaking and millions spilling out into the streets all over the archipelago and not just in Manila. It was a sea of humanity dedicated to Ninoy's proposition that it had to rise from its knees in shame and stand on its feet in honor. It was the contemporary Filipino's finest hour. It was Ninoy who brought it about by his martyrdom.

Ten years after Ninoy's death, we find that the enemies he fought are again emerging from the shadows. Quite a number of those who served the dictatorship hand and foot are back in power. We cannot, must not let go of Ninoy's memory again. A nation lives by the power of its mythology. A nation struggles up the mountain and not down to the sea because the great ghosts of the past stir again and again and

hold us by the gut. Jose Rizal. Andres Bonifacio. Apolinario Mabini. We look around today and what do we see? Crime is on the rampage. Graft and corruption is a hydra-head that multiplies and terrifies. The police force harbors a cesspool of hardened criminals. There is again a darkness that grows and spreads with frightening alarm.

It is thus that Ninoy's memory this 10th anniversary of his death is vital. It must quicken us the way blood quickens when a great crisis has to be faced. Make no mistake about it. We are a nation in deep crisis. And we need Ninoy all the more today because we need a man who defines the moment, who stands alone at the cliff to convince all of us he is not afraid of the enemy. And then we follow. And this precisely is also the purpose of this little tome that we have written for this year's anniversary. *Ninoy Aquino: Portrait of a Hero.*

We might as well recall in this preface a favorite quotation of Ninoy from a Chinese sage, which we also quoted to conclude this portrait. Ninoy never imagined it would ever be applied to him, even if drama was the very core and center of his extraordinary life. The sage said:

*"There is a sublime thieving in all giving
A man gives us all and we are his forever."*

*Teodoro Benigno
August 8, 1993*

Death at High Noon: People Power

Can anybody forget that face? It was the solemn, impassive, almost frozen mask of approaching death.

At the behest of his scowling military escorts, Ninoy Aquino rose from his seat in the China Airlines plane. The curt, almost hostile mood of his escorts convinced him right then and there that something terrible was going to happen and that possibly death awaited him down below. What must have deeply disturbed Ninoy was that not a single member of his old military escort was there. They were the dictator's minions, yes, but they treated him with due respect and civility. Now his escorts were all ground soldiers, all total strangers to him. And they were gruff. What must have struck him even more was that no high-ranking military officer was around to take him into custody. That was downright strange. Ninoy slung his travel bag on his right shoulder, moved forward, while all the other passengers in the aircraft sat still in fear and trepidation.

What were these soldiers going to do with their celebrated co-passenger? *Saan tayo pupunta?* Ninoy asked. They didn't have long to wait.

Even before Ninoy Aquino could finish his descent down a side ramp, 25 shots rang out. One shot was fired by a military escort directly behind him. The bullet pierced his head in a downward slant and left an ugly cleft on his chin. In a trice, Ninoy pitched forward, his white safari shirt smothered with blood. At high noon, his body sprawled prone on the tarmac of the Manila International Airport. Ninoy's arms were extended semi-diagonally. There was an eerie atmos-

phere in that normally bustling airport. Hardly anything was moving in the vicinity. Later on came the information there were hidden military TV cameras that recorded his death.

The official autopsy report of the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) medico-legal division mentioned as cause of death: "Brain laceration and intracranial hemorrhage secondary to gunshot wound."

Ninoy's presumed killer was a communist hitman by the name of Rolando Galman. Just to make it look genuine, Galman was also killed by the military during the fusillade of

25 shots. Nobody, of course, believed the dictatorship's claim that Galman killed Ninoy Aquino because the communist leadership of the New People's Army had a score to settle with him. It was not only a botched job. It was clumsy, hideous and grotesque. It was a conspiracy hatched in Malacanang Palace to do away with Ninoy. It

was a public execution of the dictatorship's No. 1 political enemy.

The date was August 21, 1983. The name etched on Benigno Aquino, Jr.'s passport was Marcial Bonifacio. He had traveled all the way from Boston in the US after a three-year self-exile to fulfill a date with destiny. The dead man chose his pseudonym carefully. Marcial was for martial law which the dictator Ferdinand Marcos declared September 21, 1972. Bonifacio was Fort (Andres) Bonifacio where Ninoy languished in isolation for seven years and seven months. He was the first of hundreds of top political prisoners the dictator arrested on that day.



Why was Ninoy killed? And why was he killed so outrageously?

Because he was the only Filipino who stood up to the dictatorship the way he did, fearless, refusing to bend a knee even for one instant, staring at Ferdinand Marcos eyeball to eyeball, and daring him to do his worst. He was killed outrageously because the murder at high noon was meant to be an example. It was meant to spread instant fear and terror. The citizenry would be transfixed. With Ninoy Aquino dead, the dictatorship could relax. The dead opposition leader could no longer weave his political magic on anybody. Besides, he was killed by the communists, wasn't he? And Ninoy Aquino was accused by the President as the top communist leader of the CPP-NPA, sentenced way back in 1977 by a Marcos military tribunal to death by firing squad. It hardly mattered that these charges of Ninoy Aquino being a communist were absolutely false. The dictator said so and what he said was law. So who cared?

The earlier calculation that fear and terror would grip the population was correct.

That fateful August 21 day, people talked in whispers as news of Ninoy's death spread. The shock, the silence were so palpable nobody dared to speak out in protest. Or go out into the streets. Even at the Aquino residence on 25 Times Street, Quezon City, those who kept night vigil while awaiting his bloodied remains from Fort Bonifacio Hospital, conversed in hushed tones. Among them were Lorenzo Tanada, Sr., grand old man of the opposition, Jose (Pepe) Diokno, Salvador (Doy) Laurel, Francisco (Soc) Rodrigo, Eva Estrada Kalaw. In that hushed atmosphere, somebody sprang to his feet. He was Salvador Gonzalez, a well-known science specialist and he said: "Why are we all afraid? I was raised by parents who taught me not to be afraid. Ninoy was killed by Malacanang on the orders of Imelda Marcos and General Fabian Ver! If they want to take me, they can take me!"

The bent knot of people in the house burst into applause. But in seconds, everybody fell to talking in whispers all over again. Many disagreed with the professor while praising his courage. They said it was only the dictator Ferdinand Marcos who could have ordered the assassination of Ninoy.

Once upon a time before Ninoy was arrested at the outset of martial rule, his Times Street house was a bustling bazaar of politicians and close friends and associates. Here, Senator Benigno Aquino, Jr. held forth as only he could hold forth. Ninoy talking was a drumfire of excitement and animated conversation. He was the Boy Wonder of Philippine politics. Words poured out from his mouth like bullets from a gun. His arms gestured like twin artillery pieces almost always directed at Ferdinand Marcos whom he loved to twit and sometimes spin like a top with bursts of raillery and eloquence.

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No 25 Times Street was silent. Night gathered at the white and green stuccoed house like a thick overhanging fog. The people inside occasionally stared out of the windows wondering if the headlights of an approaching vehicle signaled the arrival of Ninoy's remains. It was a sepulchral wait, at times punctuated by sobs from the women. The men continued to whisper, declining even to answer foreign newsmen's questions as to why Ninoy Aquino was liquidated so precipitately and so hideously. And who were the masterminds? The local Marcos-controlled press stayed out of the vigil coverage. Nobody believed the Galman angle.

Whatever it was, the dictatorship miscalculated. History, it seems, at times has a hidden hand. And like that of a great orchestra conductor, that hand moved during the night and touched the common people. The masses that Ninoy Aquino loved so well. Before dawn, they started to come silently and without fanfare. They formed a street-long queue in the beginning, a queue that eventually twisted and serpentineed through many streets. At first they came by the hundreds,

then by the thousands, then the tens of thousands. Who were they? They were sweepstakes vendors and vendresses, janitors, street-sweepers, nightclub workers and hostesses, clerks, small sari-sari store owners, factory workers, seamstresses, lowly government and private business employees.

Eventually, the middle class joined. And so did a handful of the rich and upper classes.

If they were afraid of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, they didn't show it. And there it was. The fear had lifted as if by some magic. Some brought food. Others pressed money into the hands of Aquino family members. A *lavandera* brought her day's earnings, a sweepstakes vendor a ten-peso bill, an old bent woman her only silken scarf to wipe Ninoy's blood with. A morning downpour came but not a single person left the queue, each coming into the Aquino residence drenched but contented and fulfilled that they had seen Ninoy and touched his coffin. Many wiped the coffin glass above his head with their handkerchiefs.

They had come to see Ninoy Aquino, more wondrous and awe-inspiring now in death than when he was alive. They saw the splotches of blood on his safari shirt, the smudges on his face. And they saw the half-smile on his features. A great majority of them were seeing Ninoy Aquino for the first time. It was as though Ninoy had a premonition that Ferdinand Marcos would eventually blink in their 11-year eyeball-to-eyeball political battle. As the bullet entered his brain, Ninoy must have grinned as only Ninoy can grin.

And thus was born a new national hero. And thus was born People Power.

When time came to transfer his remains to the Santo Domingo Church, the accompanying crowd was a flood of humanity. Seventy thousand at a glance. There, day in and day out, they came. When time came to bear his casket to Tarlac, in a motorcade that would honor the Aquino province, an even more astonishing thing happened. From far and near, along the route from Manila to Tarlac, hundreds of thousands

of thousands emerged. Peasants and farmers by the legion. (At one time, the hearse bearing Ninoy's casket was taken over by a tumultuous throng, claiming Ninoy's body as their own.) Many shouted that now he belonged to the people and not just to Ninoy's family. Cory Aquino and Dona Aurora, Ninoy's mother, had a dread feeling for a split-second that the adulation was spinning out of control.

In the Tarlac capital, there was near pandemonium as the whole town turned out in heaving, feverish crowds to pay their last respects to their favorite son. The nation didn't have a hero for a long, long time. Now Ninoy Aquino filled the bill. And how he filled the bill!

Until then, the phenomenon of People Power was already unbelievable.

It reached its climax even more unbelievably during the funeral on August 31. Not in all the history of the Philippines was the whole city emptied of its building and residential inhabitants for an event. The people came like a gully flood. There was nothing the dictatorship could do about it. Malacanang must have watched in horror as the route from Santo Domingo Church in Quezon City to Manila Memorial Cemetery in Paranaque bulged with humanity. When the funeral procession reached the Luneta, lightning struck and thunder pealed. For a brief time, the rain poured but not one spirit was dampened. Some umbrellas opened only to close almost immediately. "*Si Imelda lang ang nagpapayong! Huwag nating gayahin si Imelda!*" came the shouts. Nobody dared open an umbrella after that.

Next to EDSA three years later, that funeral was probably the Filipino's finest hour. Soft drinks were served along the way free of charge. Drinking water was extended to the marchers as well as some sandwiches and biscuits. Everybody was respectful. Those who couldn't hold their bladder during the ten-hour procession ran to side streets, to hotel and restaurant toilets, then ran back again to rejoin the funeral

march. Surprisingly, the white-maned Lorenzo Tanada, Sr. Ninoy's chief defense counsel and closest political confidant, withstood the long funeral procession without having to go to the CR. The Grand Old Man of the opposition was inside the van of the Aquino family together with Cory and the children. Marchers formed a protective cordon around the van, some vowing openly to die for the Aquino family if something dreadful would happen.

Marcos' police and military stood silently by, their faces unable to conceal their astonishment at the unprecedented turnout. There were sporadic insults thrown at them by some marchers like "*Hoy! Mga tuta ni Marcos! Magsialis na kayo!*" But they kept their peace. Some even smiled good-naturedly. Shouts of *Ni-noy! Ni-noy! Ni-noy!* punctured the air. The nation's new national hero lay silent inside a casket atop a ten-wheeler, sunflowers spread in a yellow sheath all around. The shouts came again and again: *Ni-noy! Ni-noy! Ni-noy!* It was a shout that came from the heart and the gut, a long silent subterranean welling that now came like lava flow.

Head offices of the world's biggest newspapers and magazines, international news agencies and TV networks shook their heads in disbelief. They couldn't believe their eyes and ears as their correspondents reported a funeral march of one to two million mourners. They decided to play safe and announced hundreds of thousands. The multitude of course was in the millions. They weaved and bobbed like huge, agitated clusters of grapes from windows and roofs of buildings, all paying homage to this man who defied the dictator. Those who didn't know Ninoy Aquino during the martial law years because of a controlled media knew him now. A dejected Imelda Marcos two days after the funeral said the crowds were



there to have a good time because they missed her international film festivals. "It was one big fart (*utot*)" she told foreign newsmen in a display of churlishness and execrable bad taste.

Was it? Outside of the *masa*, there were toddlers on the streets, even babies borne on the arms of their mothers, boys perched on branches of trees, nuns in their habits, priests in their *soutanas*, foreign diplomats, businessmen, schoolchildren in uniform, schoolteachers, professors, professionals, college students. And many of them also joined the shouts of *Ni-noy! Ni-noy! Ni-noy!* belted out like a mantra from a boiler dam of noise. All government offices must have been closed at the time for everybody wanted to see the cortege of Ninoy and line the funeral route.

Imelda, like her husband, completely missed the point. Ninoy was now the national hero, her husband the national villain. EDSA was to validate this three years later when another historic multitude, the middle class and the Yellow Army of Ninoy and Cory, chased the Marcoses out of Malacanang all the way to Honolulu.

The burial rites were a page out of Tolstoy, an epic sweep of lamentation and farewell. The mourners entered the Manila Memorial Cemetery in Paranaque like the breakers of the sea. Outside the cemetery, cars and vehicles honked, their headlights slashing the dark with a lonely farewell luminosity. Suddenly, lighted candles materialized in the cemetery almost from nowhere. That candle-lit throng, whose every sound was a muffled wail, was reminiscent of the torch-lit ceremony that laid that great warrior of France, Charlemagne, to rest. Ninoy Aquino was buried in a small, simple white-washed tomb that bore his name and not much else.

Ninoy: The Wonder Boy

Who was this man Ninoy? What did he do? How did he live to merit a funeral of such great, unprecedented scope? Why did his name travel from mouth to mouth like with such fervor? Why was he now a national hero?

Benigno Aquino was 50 when he died. He was born November 27, 1932. He was a cub reporter for the *Manila Times* at 17. He covered the Korean War at 18. He married Cory Cojuangco Aquino at 21. He became the youngest mayor of Concepcion, Tarlac at 22, then the youngest governor of Tarlac at 28. He was elected the youngest senator of the realm ever in 1967, 13 days short of the constitutional age required. In 1973, he was tried by a military tribunal on charges of communist subversion, illegal possession of firearms and murder. In 1975, he went on a 40-day hunger strike. In 1977, he was sentenced to death by military firing squad for communist subversion, illegal possession of firearms and murder. In 1980, he had a heart attack and was allowed out of the country for heart surgery in Dallas, Texas. In 1980-83, he, Cory Aquino and their five children lived in exile in Boston where Ninoy was a fellowship grantee at Harvard and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He returned to the Philippines August 21, 1983.

These are dates reduced to bare bones. We have to flesh them out to understand Ninoy Aquino. He was as simple as



he was complex, a man who lived life to the full and sought adventure the way a moth seeks the flame. He could emit words in bursts and also release them sometimes like church bells. But most of all, Ninoy Aquino sought the heights. There the eagle flew and high conviction resided on the mountain-top. There resided heroic courage, as did the loftiest principles of democracy and Christianity. Ninoy died as he lived -- dramatically.

Where do we begin?

We begin when he was a small kid during the four-year Japanese occupation. Ninoy even then was irrepressible, with no hang-up at all as he talked with his father's prominent



colleagues and visitors and did the same with family drivers and domestic help. The family called him TVT or *Domei* because somehow he always got the news first and regaled everybody as they came home with what he had picked up. TVT was for *Taliba*, *La Vanguardia* and *Tribune*, a highly prestigious newspaper chain then.

Domei was the Japanese news agency one heard on radio frequently during the Japanese Occupation. When somebody kidded the kid then that his eyes were chinky and looked like the Chinese eyes of Cebu's political kingpin Sergio Osmena Sr., Ninoy immediately piped in: "Yes, the eyes are those of Osmena. But the brains are those of Manuel Quezon."

We begin again at the end of the Second World War. Ninoy was thirteen, a gangling kid who hardly understood what the global holocaust was all about. What he knew wounded him badly, hurt him to the core. His father Benigno Aquino Sr. was a top official in President Laurel Sr.'s cabinet during the Japanese Occupation. He had adored his father. He shined

Don Benigno's shoes, was always at his beck-and-call, carried his portfolio. When Don Benigno, at one time Speaker and another time Agriculture secretary, was accused of collaboration with the Japanese after Liberation, Ninoy's little world began to shake.

Inside and outside school, he was taunted as the son of a traitor. How could they do this to his father? How could they do this to him? Of himself and the children of wartime President Jose P. Laurel Sr. which included Salvador (Doy) Laurel, he said: "We clung to each other...because here we were, once upon a time little princes and now nobody wanted to talk to us." The charges then of collaboration hardly mattered where Papa was concerned. He stuck by his father through thick and thin.

During the funeral rites for Benigno Aquino Sr., Ninoy was crestfallen. His father died of a heart attack December 20, 1947 while watching the world bantamweight championship between Manuel Ortiz and Filipino challenger Tirso del Rosario at the Rizal Grounds. Looking back years later, he said: "They were all praising him and now that he was dead, I was bitter, bitter at the world. I could not believe the world could still go on talking and laughing and the society pages still loaded with parties when my father lay dead. It was my first time to learn bitterness. I was 15."

For a brief period, he became a loner. He took long walks and went to the movies all by himself. He fancied then Tagalog comedies, and Nida Blanca was one of his favorites.

But somewhere in Ninoy's young psyche, an emotional gyroscope began to turn. He swore that in whatever he did as he grew up, he would seek to shine, to be the best. He would show them what an Aquino he was. He would redeem his father's name. Thus was born the Ninoy who sought both adventure and excellence, the Ninoy who loved going to the cliff because that was where danger was, where the challenge was, where the air was thinnest and the wind blew the coldest and hardest. Ninoy "grew too old to soon" his elder brother

Tony Aquino later commented.

Classes in Ateneo, La Salle, UP didn't catch the fancy of the young Aquino. Somehow they bored him. Presumably, it was also because he felt he was in hostile territory. Students continued to heckle him about his father being a collaborator. A priest-professor had the habit of heckling him, giving him bad marks, tearing up his essays. Eventually, Ninoy Aquino made a decision that was to leave a lasting mark on him. Without any training for the job, without any previous experience, in 1949 he applied for a cub reporter's slot in the *Manila Times*. His name of course was his entree. But the future course of events proved that this youngling whose prose was awful in the beginning would become a fabled name in Philippine journalism.

At the age of 18, he had the temerity to ask for an assignment to cover the war in Korea for the *Manila Times*. They gambled on him and said yes. It also helped that almost all the *Manila Times* reporters were married and they weren't exactly anxious to be assigned to cover the Korean War. It was in Korea where the teen-aged Ninoy saw death and widespread devastation. He saw buddies next to him crumple and die as they were hit and ate into his soul. Once, an American soldier hit by mortar fell on Ninoy dead and with his limbs torn. Ninoy had the shakes.

Ninoy would say of that initial period in Korea: "I was a nervous wreck. Whenever I heard a shot, I'd jump and start shaking all over again. I knew now what war was... I sank into melancholy and was homesick... I requested permission to go back home for Christmas."

Ninoy decided he didn't want anymore of it. Back at the *Manila Times*, his conscience bothered him. Did he cop out? Did his courage fail him in the face of death? Ninoy decided he had to go back to Korea. He had to wrestle with his conscience no matter what turn the war took. And it was a horrid war. When Ninoy could already look death straight in the eye, he knew he had conquered himself. Later he was to

say: "The experience aged me nearly 10 years. I wasn't 18 when I went back to Korea. I was 28. I had a different outlook. The plaything was over." Only then did he agree to come back home. As a war correspondent in Korea, he was awarded the UN Medal of Honor before he left.

Life for the young man swifted on the wings of Pegasus.

After he married Corazon Cojuangco at the age of 21, he made another fateful decision. He entered politics. The journey from mayor to governor to senator was an unprecedented political whirlwind in itself. He moved always like a jaguar on the lope. "Let's go!" was his favorite expression. It was during this period that the King Lion of Philippine politics, President Ferdinand Marcos, spotted the young man. Did he see a likeness? Did he see an adversary? Worse, an enemy? Did he see a young Marcos, a lion cub in the youthful Aquino? And therefore a person to be feared? Or cozened, courted and eventually coopted? Whatever it was, this was where the battle began. In due time, it became the battle of the two titans of Philippine politics.

Fate would have it that Benigno Aquino Jr. started his politics in Tarlac. For Tarlac was a communist-laden province in communist-laden Central Luzon where politicians and Huk insurgents played footsy with each other while waging fratricidal war. In no time at all, President Marcos had tagged Ninoy as a communist subversive, a presidential accusation that normally should make normal men so accused tremble. Ninoy loved it. He reveled in it.

When he ran for senator at the age of 34, below the constitutional minimum of 35, Ninoy exploited Marcos' charges of communism against him. While denying the charges, he planted banderillas on Marcos' back like an agile, swivel-

*"I would rather die on
my feet in honor than
live on bended knees
in shame."*

hipped matador. At the outset of the senatorial campaign where Ninoy ran in the Liberal Party ticket, only 6 per cent could recognize his name nationwide. But he proved to be a wizard as a campaigner. He travelled by helicopter to the remotest villages, distributing goodies, T-shirts, pins, food and, yes, the Ninoy charm. When the campaign ended and the electoral results were in, only Ninoy Aquino survived the Liberal Party senatorial debacle. He landed an amazing second to Jose Roy of the Nacionalista Party.

He was IN and Ninoy knew it. IN meant he could now aspire for the presidency. IN meant he could now growl in the political jungle like a great lion and square off with King Lion

in Malacanang. IN meant the whole town was now talking about him. "*Pogi na, goli pa,*" almost everybody said. He was good-looking and had a very clean reputation besides. His "white-sidewalled" haircut made him look like a choirboy. His grin was infectious, his machine-gun oratory impressive. Ninoy had all the credentials. He had

the political pedigree. He had harvested a lot of honors and awards as a public servant and politician along the way. For four consecutive years, 1968-1971, he was voted outstanding senator by the *Philippines Free Press*. In 1971, he was chosen Man of the Year by the *Philippines Free Press*.

He had the intelligence, the prodigious cunning, the sharp wit, the rapier tongue, the charm, the charisma. He reaped headlines with the greatest of ease. He also had the good luck of marrying Cory Aquino. Highly educated herself, poised, polished and also pedigreed, Cory realized early on that the only way she could get along with this human whirlwind was to be a good wife and a loving mother to their five kids. Yes,



she would stand in the shadows and serve as Ninoy took the whole world as his political oyster. They bore five children: Maria Elena, Aurora Corazon, Benigno Aquino III, Victoria Elisa, Kristina Bernadette.

And so it was just a matter of time before Senator Benigno Aquino Jr. positioned himself to be the next president of the Philippines. And like a good bullfighter, his capework and sword thrusts were beginning to gash and highly irritate the President. At one time, recalls Ninoy, he was summoned to Malacanang by Marcos. After the usual amenities, the President came straight to the point and said: "Look Ninoy, you will be president after me. So what's your hurry? Why do you keep attacking me? You know, I may not be able to stop my people. And one day, your body will just be discovered in a ditch." To which Ninoy deftly replied: "Mr. President, if that happens and they find my body in a ditch, I certainly will not be able to stop my people from getting even with Imelda and Bongbong. And they too will land in a ditch." That was Ninoy, fast on the uptake, and faster with a quip.

He had the best stage for squaring off with Marcos -- the Senate. There he was the most eloquent critic of the President, biting, slashing and almost always drawing blood. He devoured knowledge reading about 12 to 15 hours daily. The Old Man Tanada was his Senate mentor. He took these words of Tanada to heart: "Remember you are fighting a giant. You have only one chance. Either you hit him (Marcos) with the first stone and you knock him out -- or you are dead."

The old man Tanada would later visit Ninoy countless times in prison, and a strong bond developed between the two. It was Tanada as chief counsel who advised Ninoy to boycott his trial. When the *Laban* ticket was set up in 1978 for the parliamentary elections in Metro Manila, Tanada was the campaign manager. Ninoy's most effective campaigner was Kris Aquino, then only seven years old. Ninoy took all the trouble to write a letter to his youngest child about Tanada.

He wrote: "He (Tanada) gave me hope when I teetered on the brink of despair and courage, when I almost succumbed to the deadly embrace of fear. He has been the welcome lightning in my long hot summer."

Needles to say, despite a city-wide pro-Ninoy, pro-Laban noise barrage that for the first time underscored the bitter resentment of Manilans against the dictatorship, *Laban* lost to the KBL. It had to be. Ninoy could not be allowed to get out of prison and join the interim *Batasang Pambansa*. That would be an act of suicide for the dictatorship. And since Ninoy could not win, no other *Laban* candidate could either. The noise barrage April 6, 1978, scared Marcos out of his wits.

Manilans by the tens of thousands came out into the streets. They banged pots and pans. They banged anything to make noise. Cars caromed all over the city with empty gasoline drums trailing them. Churchbells all over the metropolis rang. Even some beat policemen rejoiced and emptied their guns into the air. Motorcycle cops revved their engines and smiled at the demonstrators. The citizens flashed the *Laban* sign of extended

*"A pact with the devil
is no pact at all."*

forefinger and thumb. For the first time, Marcos realized how much the people, particularly the middle class, hated his guts.

So *Laban* had to be cheated wholesale and Imelda topped the elections for Metro Manila. It was a KBL sweep. The dictator gloated and said the noise barrage was a concoction of the communists. Outraged, *Laban* led by Tanada, staged a "funeral march" for the "death of democracy". About 600 joined including many of the *Laban* candidates. The marchers were stopped by the military on Espana St. long before they could reach the Manila Cathedral. They were all arrested and brought to Fort Bonifacio on charges of sedition and subversion.

Herblock, the mordant cartoonist of *Washington Post*, drew one of his prize-winning masterpieces on this event. The cartoon showed a defiant Tanada extending the *Laban* sign at his captors and being bundled into a military van, while Marcos in Malacanang harrumphed: "I already gave them the right to vote. Why, the ingrates! They were also demanding that their votes be counted!"

The more Marcos called him a communist, the more Aquino relished it. For him the false communist charges were the bow on which he would fasten his sharpest and surest arrows and send them raining on Malacanang. Ninoy already did score. He exposed the Jabidah scandal hatched secretly by Malacanang. Jabidah was the code-name for top-secret Philippine government military operations to get into Sabah, North Borneo.

Another event that catapulted Ninoy into the limelight was the August 21, 1971 Plaza Miranda massacre. Almost the entire Liberal Party senatorial and other candidates were downed by a ferocious grenade attack. Ninoy, as fate would have it, was attending a Laurel party at the Keg Room of the Jai-Alai. He was taking his time because he was the Plaza Miranda rally's last speaker, the fire-breathing orator who would bring the house down with his oratory and wit. Ninoy was secretary-general of the Liberal Party.

Almost everybody suspected the Marcos administration of being behind the Plaza Miranda massacre. Many years later after EDSA, rifts in the leadership of CPP-NPA brought out the information that Jose Maria Sison, then chairman of the CPP, conceived the Plaza Miranda siege to heighten revolutionary tension because people would blame the massacre on Marcos. Until now, the entire truth about Plaza Miranda has not come out. Nonetheless, Ninoy Aquino superbly played the role of Richard the Lion-Hearted after the massacre. He went round town in combat uniform, taunting Marcos, driving his critical knife deeper into the President's

sides. The result of the senatorial elections saw a Liberal Party sweep. Ninoy was jubilant. Marcos countered by hinting Ninoy and the communists had something to do with the Plaza Miranda bombing. This, of course, didn't jell.

There was no doubt in the mind of anybody that if presidential elections were held in 1973, Ninoy would win them over Imelda Marcos, whom the president was grooming at the time to succeed him. A national survey was taken. It showed that Ninoy would beat Imelda handily if the two should ever square off in a presidential election.

Martial Law: Life in Prison

What to do? In retrospect, the realization dawned that Ferdinand Marcos would not allow anybody outside his official family to succeed him in Malacanang. Since Imelda could not win in 1973, Ninoy had to be stopped at all costs. There was only one way to do it. Marcos would stage a coup on himself and declare martial rule. This time he had the arrows and Ninoy was his bow. Ninoy would be the first to be arrested September 22, 1971. He would be formally charged as a top communist leader and a military tribunal would try him and find him guilty.

The excuse for the declaration of martial rule was that a communist conspiracy was on the verge of taking the country over. Marcos said he had to save the republic. He also mentioned the "clerico-fascists" as a threat, meaning the princes of the Roman Catholic church and their allies in big business. But it was the "communists" Marcos said he feared most. This was preposterous on its very face. At this time, there were only about 400 New People's Army guerillas in the entire country. At the time, they couldn't even take over a second-rate town. Eventually the NPA guerillas would leave Central Luzon and run for cover in the mountain fastnesses of the deep north. Then they were a rag-tag army.

Whatever the falsity of the charges, whatever the emptiness of the presidential claim that the communists were knocking at the gates of Manila, Marcos displayed his political genius to the full. More than anybody else, more than Ninoy at the time, Marcos knew how fragile democracy in the Philippines was. He knew the weakness, the surface docility of the Filipino, how easy it was to corrupt their leaders, how

malleable the military establishment whose leaders he bent and bought at will. He knew a *golpe* could do it. A coup unfolding in the first three hours after midnight.

He would arrest Senators Benigno Aquino Jr., Ramon Mitra, Jose Diokno and a host of others, among them prominent journalists. The nation would be stunned, silenced, petrified, shocked beyond belief. But he had the power that flowed from the barrel of a gun. And for him that was sufficient for the moment. What would come next was propaganda. This was the stuff that Hitler and Goebbels unleashed in Germany after *Kristalnacht* when the Jews were laid siege on. Eventually six million Jews would be burned in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, Belsen, Maidenek. Eventually, thousands of Filipino freedom-fighters would be herded to Marcos jails all over the country.

20 With the awesome power of martial rule in his hands, Marcos and his family could perpetuate themselves in power. Imelda would rule after him. And after Imelda, the children. Bongbong and Imee were already being readied. Bongbong took a crash course in jungle training and was designated a special assistant to the President. Imee easily won a congressional seat and headed the *Kabataang Barangay*. Ninoy Aquino was a goner. He would be sentenced to death by military musketry, and that was that.

This was Ali Baba with a difference. Even as he and his cronies plundered the country, Ferdinand Marcos with his control of media would project himself as the Messiah, the Savior. Yes, "*the Philippines will be great again.*" That was the Marcos slogan. Later on, after he was released from Fort Bonifacio much ahead of Ninoy, Senator Diokno would tell foreign newsmen that the Philippines was populated outside of jail by "49 million cowards and one sonavabitch." He was right. But again not right all the way.

And thus began the dramatic duel between the Man in the Palace and the Man in Prison.

The dictator gambled right and ingeniously up to a certain point. Indeed, the entire country clammed up. Indeed, even the left-wing youth dared not venture out into the streets. Indeed, the military ate from his hands, particularly General Fabian Ver and his jackbooted *condotierre*. Indeed, the friends and political associates of Ninoy Aquino deserted him as they beat a path to the goodies of Malacanang and the glory of basking in the shadow of the Marcoses. Indeed, the United States of America continued to support him and the dictatorship. Indeed, the military tribunal led by the dour-faced, imperious General Jose Syjuco sentenced him to death by military musketry.

Ninoy simply enjoyed relating the following incident. He sought and got an audience with Marcos in Malacanang after his first year in Fort Bonifacio. This time, they addressed each other as brod, both being members of the same UP fraternity *Upsilon Sigma Phi*. Marcos started off by saying: "Brod, why don't you

give up and just join me? All your followers have deserted you and even some of your closest advisers and political lieutenants have sworn allegiance to my government. How about it?" Quick as a flash, Ninoy riposted: "Brod, let's exchange places. I'll bet you that General Fabian Ver will desert you and join me and Kokoy (Romualdez) will follow. Wanna bet?"

It was in sentencing Ninoy to death in November 1977, however, that Ferdinand Marcos hit an unexpected tripwire.

The death sentence on Ninoy Aquino shocked the world. It shocked particularly the United States. American media, led by the prestigious *New York Times*, condemned the verdict and cudgelled the dictator for it. A host of American politicians,



led by Senator Alan Cranston, angrily demanded that the death sentence be set aside. In the face of this international furor, the dictator had to retreat. He couldn't afford at this time to antagonize the US Congress. He badly needed American economic and military aid to sustain his dictatorship. He backed off. Ninoy knew the death sentence was coming. But he told Cory and the children not to worry. He somehow knew Marcos was not yet ready to make a martyr out of him.

Previous to the death sentence, Ninoy underwent two experiences, two events that seared into him like twin spiritual branding irons. The first was his 30-day imprisonment in Fort Magsaysay, Laur, Nueva Ecija from March 12 to April

11, 1973. The second was the 40-day hunger strike he waged in Fort Bonifacio April 4 to May 13, 1975 to protest his kangaroo trial at the hands of the military tribunal. The first saw Ninoy question the justice and fairness of God as day after day, death hovered like a continuing click of a slow-motion Russian roulette. The second saw Ninoy slump into a Gandhi-like protest hunger strike which tested his last physical and spiritual

*"I cannot in all conscience
remain silent while a
ruthless dictator rules in
my country which has
become a garrison state."*

reserves and resources. In both, he triumphed.

Long before he launched his hunger strike, Ninoy Aquino told the military tribunal on August 27, 1973: "Some people suggest that I beg for mercy. But this I cannot in conscience do. I would rather die on my feet in honor than live on bended knees in shame." Again on August 3, 1976, Ninoy told the same military tribunal: "To acquit me, you have to declare Marcos guilty. This you cannot do... There is so much anguish and despair...so much faint courage demanding to be reinforced by bold, imaginative, resolute and committed leadership." He would furnish that leadership against all odds.

In the matchbox prison that was Laur (where Pepe Diokno was also imprisoned at the same time), Ninoy asked God: "What terrible crimes have I committed to deserve this fate? The *magnanakaws* are living it up and I who tried to walk the narrow path of public service with integrity am now about to meet an uncertain fate? Is this justice?" Stripped naked, stripped of his wedding ring, watch, eyeglasses, shoes and the clothes he was wearing when brought over from Fort Bonifacio, Ninoy pondered his fate. Then all his will, all his strength turned inward like outgoing floodwaters sucked back to their origin.

Even then, it took tremendous willpower to survive Laur. In a subsequent letter to President Marcos, Ninoy recounted that to keep himself from going insane, he set his mind to remembering every little detail of his life from birth to prison. First they came in bits and pieces as memories of childhood could sometimes blur. Then they came in ripples hour after hour, day after day as harking back became more vivid. Then they came in waves as the recollection touched the major events of his life. All the time, Ninoy was walking barefoot around his steel cot, round and round, because he had to move with his memory. Then after the last summons of memory, he fell, exhausted. Laur made Ninoy realize how mortal he was, how finite, how puny in the universe of God. In Laur, he realized he didn't have all the answers. His cockiness left him, his sure-fingered knowledge of everything one could discuss under the sun.

Cory would relate later it was Laur that toughened Ninoy, that gave him the spiritual cartridges to look at any kind of danger with a smile. Now he could exchange high-fives with the Grim Reaper with religious resolve and resignation. As Cory said it: "Ninoy realized that without God, he would not be able to continue being in detention."

Finally, in his letter to Fort Bonifacio co-prisoner Francisco (Soc) Rodrigo, he wrote: "In the depths of my solitude and desolation, during those long hours of meditations, I found my

inner peace. He stood me face to face with myself and forced me to look at my emptiness and nothingness, and then helped discover Him who has really never left my side. But because pride shielded my eyes and the lust for earthly and temporal power, honor and joys drugged my mind, I failed to notice Him." Back in Fort Bonifacio, Ninoy was reciting more than 100 rosaries daily.

The 40-day hunger strike would have looked like madness coming from anybody else. Hunger strikes, like those of Mahatma Gandhi, have to resonate nationwide and worldwide to achieve their goal. The Mahatma succeeded in unleashing world public opinion against British colonization of India. Gandhi became an international figure. Ninoy fasted when he had no access to local media, when the war in Vietnam fully occupied the international press.

24 But he hunger-struck just the same. Ninoy's trial was a disgraceful farce. Surrendered NPA commanders such as Melody and Pusa testified that Ninoy was not only a communist but had led NPA raids. At one time, Commander Pusa testified he accompanied Senator Benigno Aquino Jr. in his Mercedes car. They reportedly made the rounds of luxury subdivisions such as Forbes Park and Ninoy identified the prominent people living there so they could later on be assassinated by the NPA. It was absolute rot, incredible fantasy. I covered that trial for the *Agence France-Presse* and I heard the testimonies of Pusa and Melody. I felt like vomiting.

Ninoy shrank and lost about 43 pounds during his hunger strike. Towards the end of his fast, he had to be helped out of bed by Cory. Then both of them walked shakily like desert stragglers for the bathroom. Ninoy would alternately rest on three folding chairs along the way to nurse his fast fading strength. Then Cory would wash him, first his head, then his body which emitted a foul odor because of stomach acids generated by the fast. On the way back to bed, it was the same.

They way-stopped on the same folding chairs as Ninoy scraped his fading lungs for the last fragments of his physical strength. His rationale was patriotism to the very core. Even when it seemed the whole world had caved in against him, particularly his fellow countrymen, to Ninoy "the Filipino was worth dying for."

Ninoy had fallen unconscious on May 13. Prior to that, he was administered the last rites in his Fort Bonifacio cell by Jaime Cardinal Sin. Ninoy was then close to approaching the verge of passing away, or at the very least of lapsing into a vegetable state for the rest of his life. The military rushed him to the Veterans Memorial Hospital. There they force-fed him. And so he lived.

On December 20, 1979, President Marcos allowed Ninoy out on prison on a temporary furlough so he could celebrate the Christmas and New Year holidays with Cory in their Times Street residence, Quezon City. It was at this time that I and other foreign corre-

spondents had long conversations with Ninoy. It was then that he developed the "historic rendezvous" theory. He figured that Marcos was in a bind, and knew he was in a bind because the nation was going from bad to worse, economically and socially. Besides, Ninoy disclosed that the president was seriously ill with *lupus erythematosus*, a deadly skin disease. Marcos therefore would desire to "dismount the tiger and link hands with me in a historic rendezvous," he said. Together, they would scuttle martial rule and restore democracy.

This was probably Ninoy Aquino's Achilles heel. He felt that there was a real Christian in every man, that in the dictator the Child of Nazareth was simply waiting to be

*"There can be no deal with
a dictator."*

touched, encouraged or succored. He seemed convinced that in the end Marcos was willing to reform and step down. His "historic rendezvous" proposal, which certainly was monitored by Marcos because the Times residence was bugged, fell on deaf ears. Marcos was not going to meet him, neither in Malacanang nor in Fort Bonifacio. It was General Fabian Ver who went to Fort Bonifacio. He told Ninoy that Marcos was strong and healthy as a bull. All this talk about the President suffering gravely from *lupus erythematosus* was baloney, the general said.

Ninoy was deeply disappointed. It was then that he thought of going into exile in the United States.

But even this Marcos shot down. He could not allow his prize prisoner to slip away. In a handwritten letter to Lorenzo Tanada Sr. who worked hard to secure the president's permission to allow Ninoy Aquino to leave, Marcos was polite but curt. The president said this was just not possible "under the present circumstances." Maybe later when there was no pressure being exerted on him in behalf of Ninoy. This was the dictator's way of saying *no* categorically. Ninoy was his prize catch. The dictator would see to it that amenities would be extended to Ninoy from time to time to show the world he was human. But his real objective was for the world to forget Ninoy and for Ninoy to rot slowly in prison since he could not kill him at the time.

Heart Attack: Exile to America

So after the Christmas and New Year holidays, Ninoy returned to his prison cell. After the flush of that Christmas season furlough and all the publicity it generated in the foreign press, Ninoy disappeared anew into the nation's forgetfulness. But fate was to intervene again. On March 19, 1980, during his early morning exercise, Ninoy felt his chest constrict as he did push-ups. The pain was piercing. When the doctors finally diagnosed what happened, they pronounced that the prisoner had suffered a heart attack. More thorough exams and diagnosis at the Philippine Heart Center where he was rushed showed -- after another attack -- that the patient was in very serious condition. An operation -- triple heart bypass -- was called for as soon as possible.

The prisoner balked. He was afraid the heart surgeons of the Heart Center would do him in on the orders of the dictator. He requested that the surgery be performed by surgeons of his own choosing and this would be at the Baylor Hospital in Dallas, Texas. Baylor was internationally renowned for heart surgery. This time it was the dictator who hesitated. For Ninoy refused to be operated on at the Heart Center. If they couldn't grant him his request to be operated abroad, then he preferred to go back to his prison cell in Fort Bonifacio. There he would die. And he wanted it that way.

This time it was President Marcos who hesitated. If Ninoy would die in prison, all the world would blame him. He would

"Very few people in the world are given the opportunity to die for their country. Don't you forget that. So don't feel sorry for me. Because this is the greatest opportunity ever given to me by God."

be denounced as heartless, gutless and ruthless, a dictator who sought only pomp and power, who could not be gracious and merciful to a dying prisoner. Imelda too realized that predicament. As Ninoy removed his necklace and offered it to Imelda to forward to the president, the regal First Lady, dressed in a shimmering floor-length pink terno, offered to guarantee Ninoy's behavior abroad. Marcos reluctantly agreed. He had no choice.

And thus the curtains lifted on the Third Act of the political duel between Marcos and Aquino.

The triple heart bypass on May 13, 1980 in Baylor Hospital was successful. In no time, Ninoy Aquino was on his



legs, jogging in Dallas, breathing the air of freedom, realizing all over again how wonderful the world could be after seven years and seven months in solitary. An offer for a fellowship in international studies in Harvard University in Boston came. Ninoy Aquino snapped it up. The first year in Boston was idyllic. Ninoy had promised

Cory and the children he would turn his back on politics and they would live a new life in America. Why not? Everything now was a bonus, Ninoy repeatedly said. In Harvard he became an almost instant celebrity not because he was Benigno Aquino but because he too was an intellectual giant among America's famed intellectual giants.

Ninoy would say later on that Harvard was a "paradise" for learning and he was very lucky to be in this paradise. He was particularly intoxicated by the fact that well-known authors he read back home in his Fort Bonifacio cell were with the Harvard faculty. Now he not only knew them but had the opportunity to discuss with them, even at times cross intellec-

tual swords with them. Stanley Hoffman, Lucien Pye, Benjamin Houston Brown, David Steinberg, were just four of many. Harvard teemed with intellectual heavyweights.

Harvard professors were amazed with Ninoy's intellectual range.

Ben Brown, the redoubtable head of Harvard's Fellowship Studies who I interviewed in 1984 after Ninoy's death, told me there was nothing they could discuss without Ninoy coming in and enriching the discussion. "Even when we discussed American history and politics," Mr. Brown said, "Ninoy had something to add and we were all amazed." Ninoy after all had a deep incisive intelligence of his own and in prison he must have read thousands of books, magazines and other publications. On almost everything. Ninoy quoted Marcos as telling him through an emissary: "I envy you because you have all the time in the world. At your fingertips you have the greatest symbols available to you, the greatest books, which are not available to me because all my working hours are spent with people. Here you are with the greatest luxury of the greatest minds in the world."

This was what Ben Brown had to say of Ninoy Aug. 26, 1983 after his death at the Aquino Memorial Service at the Holy Family church in New York City: "There was Ninoy the thinker, detached in analysis, hungry for knowledge and ideas - the Ninoy who read everything, forgot nothing, and always had what was germane to the discussion right at his fingertips. If I am not mistaken, he was the most informed public figure I have ever known. But reserved. Skeptical."

MIT Center for International Studies Director Eugene Skolnikoff in another Aquino retrospective November 7, 1983, stated: "Ninoy Aquino was always, even astonishingly perceptive and superbly analytical. I have no doubt...that if he succeeded in reaching the presidency (of the Philippines), he would have made a supreme leader." Another Harvard eminento Stanley Hoffman talked highly of Ninoy. I believe it was Hoffman who together with another Harvard professor

enthusiastically supported the proposal to invite Ninoy as a Harvard Fellow.

I went back to Boston, as mentioned earlier, a year after Ninoy's death. With Cory Aquino's approval, I started to undertake a biography of Ninoy, a book I worked hard on but never finished. Just when I had dug deeper into research on his life, Cory had become President of the Philippines. In no time at all, she offered me the post of spokesman and press secretary, and I had to drop everything. I interviewed person-

alities from the West Coast to the East Coast who knew Ninoy well, but Harvard would provide the main ingredients of Ninoy's three-year exile in America.

Among those I interviewed in Harvard was the attractive academic secretary of that famed university. Her name I now forget because I lost all my notes and tapes of that Harvard sojourn. With nothing short of rapture, she told me: "What a pity Ninoy was not an American! He would have made an excellent politician. He would have gone all the way to the top and I would have voted for him as president."

It was Ben Brown however who captured the quintessential Ninoy when he quoted the French philosopher Henri Bergson. The latter, Brown said, "enjoined the men of his generation to think like men of action and act like men of thought." Dean Brown said "Ninoy seemed to embody that form of excellence in the fullest measure."

In Harvard's Wiedener library, Ninoy gorged on the philosophy of non-violence. He read tomes and tomes on this subject, starting with Mahatma Gandhi, followed by Martin Luther King, Gene Starke, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Reinhold Niebuhr, Thoreau, Tolstoy. But in due time the closed world of Philippine politics began to open again. Fellow Filipino



exiles living in America sought him out and urged Ninoy to lead them. Soon he was on the speech circuit. Then the old fire started to come back, the sharp cutting edge, the legendary one-liners, the wit, the jab, the crushing right cross. He had made a pact in Manila to behave, not to embarrass the Marcos dictatorship while he was in the US. Ninoy, at the urging of the Filipino opposition in the US who clamored for him to speak out, turned back on his promise.

"A pact with the devil is no pact at all," he said. He spoke to cheering audiences. He was told by the American diplomat who manned the Philippine desk in the State Department to lower his political profile since after all he was a guest of the US. "After all," he told Ninoy, "you are next in line for the presidency. Why can't you be patient." I know all about this for I interviewed this diplomatic officer in August 1983 in Washington after my many talks with Ninoy late July and early August. I sharply disagreed with him that Ninoy had to keep quiet in America. Well, Ninoy's reply was predictable. "I cannot in all conscience remain silent while a ruthless dictator rules in my country which has become a garrison state."

Even as he eschewed violence, Ninoy could not help being obsessed by Ferdinand Marcos. The dictator was on his mind every day. The *lupus* thing had grown into a something like a nagging Frankenstein in Ninoy's consciousness. *Lupus erythematosus* is a crippling skin disease that gradually hits the vital organs of the human body. Ninoy thought Marcos was on the verge of death. Ninoy was convinced he had only one year in which to move, to convince the dictator to dismount the tiger of martial rule. And so he made another fateful decision.

He would return to the Philippines. The horizon in his country was darkening, the NPA guerrillas were getting stronger, the economy was sinking. Up the road he felt there would be an explosion and he had to return to head it off.

Murder and Martyrdom

I was in Boston at the time he firmed up his decision to return. I had a formal interview with him as Manila bureau chief of the *Agence France-Presse*. This was his last press interview in Boston before he set out for Manila.

Outside of the interview, we had long animated conversations. It was during one such conversation that the telephone rang, and Ninoy simply listened most of the time. He would just say oh, is that so, really and all that. This was unusual, Ninoy just listening. Without identifying his caller, Ninoy told me this man warned him not to go back, it was risky. Ninoy had a faraway look, as of an explorer out to embark on a fateful and dangerous journey.

The dictatorship warned all international airlines against taking Benigno Aquino Jr. as a Manila-bound passenger. Their rights to land or transit in Manila would be cancelled if they did so. Ninoy therefore had to resort to the pseudonym Marcial Bonifacio. He had already secretly secured a passport from a friend and contact in a Philippine consulate. But the death warnings and Marcos' *diktat* to the airlines had no effect. Ninoy was determined, purposeful, audacious. Nobody could deter him.

He almost changed plans however as a result of that telephone call. He looked out of the window, laid a fist on the sill, then turned to me. "Teddy, I will return to the Philippines through the backdoor," he said. "I shall go underground and I will fight from there and join the resistance. Yes, that is what I shall do." I was aghast. I remonstrated with him. I told him that was exactly what Marcos wanted him to do -- go back and go underground. Then the dictator could announce that Ninoy was really an outlaw, and now had proven he was a dangerous

outlaw. Now the dictator could hunt him down and kill him.

But as easily as he had thought of going back through the Philippines' backdoor in the South, he changed his mind. He was probably also testing how I would react if he decided to go back through the southern backdoor. He shifted fast. He would go back as he had planned, through the front door, and not all the dictator's soldiers and all the dictator's men could frighten him. Ninoy, I also realized, was terribly homesick. And the imminence of returning home drew a nostalgic mist in his eyes. He would tell close relatives who visited him in Boston that they were very lucky, they were living in the Philippines.

*"Now, for this single
opportunity, I am
putting my life on the
line."*

Ninoy told Howard Fine, well-known human rights advocate, in Boston: "Very few people in the world are given the opportunity to die for their country. Don't you forget that. So don't feel sorry for me. Because this is the greatest opportunity ever given to me by God." Much earlier, he told a favorite brother-in-law Ricardo (Baby) Lopa, married to Cory's elder sister Terry: "You know if I should be killed on my return to the Philippines, that would be something. Only twice in contemporary history has this golden opportunity befallen two Asians. Jose Rizal and Mahatma Gandhi. If fate wills it, I shall be the third."

Cory, his mother and all the members of his family had all tried to deter him earlier. Now the suspicion he would be killed brought him back to the pitholes of Laur. Back to the apparition of the Virgin Mary which he thought he saw in a moment of utter desolation. Ninoy's jaw clenched.

What mattered was courage. Ninoy would show Filipinos he was not afraid of the dictator. What mattered was the

historic opportunity, yes the "historic rendezvous" he had never really set aside. What mattered was that he might be able to convince Marcos to give him "one hour, just one hour" and in that hour both of them could reach an understanding to restore democracy. Ninoy was smitten with that rendezvous thing, and couldn't get it off his mind.

One of the replies of Ninoy in that August 1, 1983 interview I had with him in his Boston residence had to do with his return: "What prompted me to return? If I do not move now, there will be nothing to reach for in five years. Since President Marcos is still president until 1987, if he gives me a chance to talk to him, my plan is to plead with him for fair and honest elections -- they must be credible.... If I fail, okay *lang*. At least, I can face my God and say: I have tried everything I could do to the extent of sacrificing my life and my family."

Another quote from that interview: "I'm still convinced that the safest and cheapest way to return our democracy is through Mr. Marcos. When you consider all the options, convincing Mr. Marcos to return us to democracy would be the safest, the least costly of all the other options. Now, Mr. Marcos has residual power. He has residual authority. He has residual legitimacy to pull it off. If Mr. Marcos tomorrow decides to have clean and honest elections -- yes, people will back him up. A few will possibly object even vociferously or will even not follow him. But I think 70 per cent will follow him."

And finally: "Now, for this single opportunity, I am putting my life on the line. Just a chance to talk to him one on one. I know he doesn't trust me. He thinks I'm most unreliable. Maybe he hates me. But all I am asking in exchange for my life, for my freedom, is one hour to talk to him. After talking to him, after making my presentation, it's up to him. But at that point, I can rest peacefully and say: I have done everything I can do, and after that, there's nothing more I feel I should do."

Death hovered over this mission and Ninoy felt it. At one time, he and Cory kidded each other about the color of amulets they would wear upon their return to stave off the assassins' bullets. He had earlier planned to return to Manila with son Noynoy and daughter Kris. Cory would follow later with daughters Ballsy (the eldest), Pinky and Viel. With the death threats becoming more persistent, Ninoy decided he had to come back alone. He also thought of asking President Marcos to grant Cory and the kids a safe-conduct pass on their return but changed his mind.

But even as far back as August 4, 1980, Ninoy already seriously pondered the idea of going back to the Philippines. At that time, he told the Asia Society in New York: "I have asked myself many times: Is the Filipino worth suffering, or even dying for? Is he not a coward who would readily yield to any colonizer, be he foreign or home-grown? Is a Filipino more comfortable under the authoritarian leader because he does not want to be burdened with the freedom of choice? Is he unprepared, or worse, ill-suited for presidential or parliamentary democracy? I have carefully weighed the virtues and the faults of the Filipino and I have come to the conclusion he is worth dying for because he is the nation's greatest untapped resource." Dying, that was always in Ninoy's mind. Dying for a cause.

That was flashback. Now let's flash forward.

On August 20, 1983, in Taipei, the eve of the last stage of his return journey to Manila, Ninoy was telling a group of foreign journalists in his hotel: "You have to be ready with your hand cameras because this action can become very fast. In a matter of three minutes, it could be over, you know. I may not be able to talk to you again after this. So this is the danger, the big danger. Now I am taking some precautions. I have my bulletproof vest, hoping that that could be some kind of protection. But if they hit me in the head, then there's nothing I can do there."

And again before the same group in Taipei: "My feeling is that we all have to die sometimes. Now if it's my fate to die by an assassin's bullet, so be it. But I cannot be perturbed by inaction or fear of assassination and therefore stay in a corner. I have suffer with my people. I have to lead them because of the responsibility given to me by our people."

In between his departure from Boston and his arrival in Taipei, the death threat loomed even more ominously. In Taipei, Ninoy must have received reliable intelligence reports from Manila that upon arrival, they would get him. A communist gunman would do the job. So it was in his mind almost all the time. But Ninoy could not, could never be deterred. Either he relished or was fated for that sort of thing--going to the edge of the cliff, feeling the wind whip at his face, daring the fates. Daring the assassin's bullet.

This was where great decisions are made, where heroes are separated from ordinary mortals.

The arrival statement Ninoy Aquino bore in his hand-carried travel bag as he went down the China Airlines plane at MIA August 21 was never delivered. He was for national reconciliation and unity but this could only be achieved "with justice" and "There can be no deal with a dictator" and certainly "no compromise with dictatorship." Again, the heroic breath of Gandhi was in one paragraph: "According to Gandhi, the willing sacrifice of the innocent is the most powerful answer to insolent tyranny that has yet been conceived by God and man." But the concluding quotation was taken from Archibald Macleish:

"I have carefully weighed the virtues and the faults of the Filipino and I have come to the conclusion he is worth dying for because he is the nation's greatest untapped resource."

"How shall freedom be defended? By arms when it is attacked by arms; by truth when it is attacked by lies; by democracy when it is attacked by authoritarian dogma. Always, and in the final act, by determination and faith."

And by heroic death and martyrdom when finished off by an assassin's bullet. What happened on that airport tarmac at high noon fitted perfectly into a favorite quotation of Ninoy from a Chinese sage:

"There is a sublime thieving in all giving. A man gives us all and we are his forever."

